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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000774

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [PREF](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SIDON LEADERS HOPEFUL WITH NEW PRESIDENT;
CONCERNED ABOUT PALESTINIAN EXTREMISM

REF: A. BEIRUT 766
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 733

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a May 26 visit to the predominately Sunni, southern city of Sidon, the Charge heard from independent MP and philanthropist Bahia Hariri (Rafiq's sister), acting Sunni Mufti Salim Soussan, and members of the Sidon Chamber of Commerce. All of the interlocutors expressed hope for a new era following the Doha agreement and the May 25 election of President Michel Sleiman (reftels). They all are concerned about extremism in Lebanon, especially in neighboring Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, home to up to 100,000 Palestinians. They lamented the poor living conditions in the camp, referring to it as "terrorist breeding ground," and called for a global solution. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) In a May 26 trip to the predominately Sunni city of Sidon in southern Lebanon, the Charge, accompanied by EmbOffs, met with independent MP and philanthropist Bahia Hariri, who is former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's sister, Sheikh Salim Soussan, the acting mufti of Sidon and Mohammed Zaatari, the head of the Sidon Chamber of Commerce and his associates.

BAHIA HARIRI: ENTERING A
NEW CHAPTER WITH SLEIMAN

[1](#)3. (C) Pro-March 14 Sunni independent MP Bahia Hariri (who was actually elected on Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's list in 2005), told the Charge she felt a sense of relief after voting for President Michel Sleiman on May 25 (Ref A). "We are in a new era, a new chapter for the region," she said. Noting that she had listened carefully to Sleiman's election speech, she called it a "global map for Lebanon." However, she cautioned, his speech was a "shift forward, but not a reconciliation." She believed her nephew Saad, whom she raised with his brother Baha since they were very young, should become the next prime minister.

[1](#)4. (C) Bahia expressed her concern that a new electoral law, based on small districts, would separate people in an unproductive way. She preferred larger districts, even if that meant Christians are included in predominately-Muslim

districts.

15. (C) Providing a historical account of Sunni relations with the other confessions in Lebanon, she spoke of the kinship the Sunni Lebanese felt with the Sunni Palestinians when they arrived to Lebanon in 1948. Endorsing the Taif agreement, she said it played a critical role in establishing equality among the confessions, adding that Muslims could only partner with Christians once they felt they were equal. Taif must be preserved, she maintained.

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES
VULNERABLE TO EXTREMISM

16. (C) Noting that there are as many as 100,000 Palestinian refugees living in the Ain al-Hilweh camp, located a few hundred meters away, she implored the Charge to include the Palestinian cause as part of a larger regional peace agreement. "The link between the Palestinian refugees and fundamentalism is dangerous," she warned. She described the inside of the camp as divided into factions with no single leader, adding that she meets regularly with all of the factions, who have links with other camps as well. The Sidon Chamber of Commerce members said the "inhumane living conditions makes Ain al-Hilweh a terrorist breeding ground."

17. (C) Bahia said she focuses her philanthropic efforts on the camps to curb extremism. She noted that her involvement in the camps has prevented escalation in some situations, citing recent clashes between the opposition and the Sunni

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and Druze from March 14, in which she said the refugees refrained from participating. During the Nahr al-Barid fighting the previous summer, Bahia said the Palestinians in Ain al-Hilweh "were forced to take a decision to support the Lebanese Armed Forces."

18. (C) Active in executing the Hariri Foundation's charitable programs, Bahia said she partners with Palestinian civil society organizations inside the camps to work with the refugees. She told us about dialogue projects she manages where she brings together the different factions, including the youth. Now, she said, her program is preparing for a youth summer camp for 15-20 year old refugees, based on Lebanese curriculum and offering activities ranging from art to reconciliation. She noted she ran a similar camp during the Nahr al-Barid fighting.

MUFTI OF SIDON CONCERNED
ABOUT MOSQUES IN REFUGEE CAMPS

19. (C) The Charge met Sunni acting Mufti of Sidon Salim Soussan at his Dar al Fatwa office in Sidon. Recalling the recent clashes between the opposition and the majority, Soussan said that some Hizballah and Amal Movement members called him for an appointment because they wanted a "green light" to proceed with their plan. He told us he refused to meet with them until the fighting had subsided. He commented that "one party" (Hizballah) used force instead of democracy and now there is a political imbalance.

110. (C) Agreeing with the Charge that the Doha agreement (Ref B) must be implemented, Soussan said that it is a crucial first step to resolving Lebanon's internal strife. He commented on the importance of the international foreign ministers' attendance at the May 25 presidential election and swearing-in ceremony, saying that Lebanon sits on a regional "earthquake fault" and therefore requires international fortification. He called for more balance by the U.S. in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

111. (C) The Mufti expressed his concern that the mosques in the camps are guided by poorly-trained sheikhs ("All it takes

is three weeks of training and a beard") compared to his eleven years of training, including six years at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. While the Mufti offers "moderate clerics" training, he said that the refugees do not participate in this training and there is no telling what is being preached in the mosques.

¶12. (C) The refugees suffer from inadequate health and education care, can no longer legally own property, and consequently have no hope for a future, Soussan explained. He concluded that all of this together leads to extremism. During the recent May clashes, Soussan reported that Palestinian Fatah representatives called him to ask if there was a role for them. Soussan said he requested that they stay out of the conflict, to which he reported they agreed. The Fatah representatives had also called him the day before, Presidential inauguration day, to seek advice, he said.

SIDON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ANTICIPATING AN ECONOMIC BOOM -----

¶13. (C) The Charge also met with Mohammed Zaatari, the head of the Sidon Chamber of Commerce; Mounir Bissat a vice president of the Chamber; Mohammed Saleh, another VP; and member Kassem Khalifeh, a relative of resigned Minister of Health Mohammed Khalifeh, who said agribusiness is Sidon's main industry, including banana and sweets exports.

¶14. (C) The members expressed their support for Sleiman's acceptance speech, saying that he mentioned every necessary point in a "balanced" manner. Sleiman will be able to use his sound judgment to bring the parties together, President Zaatari anticipated. The extensive debates during the May 25 parliamentary session to elect Sleiman indicate that democracy is at work in Lebanon, Zaatari assessed.

EXPANDING VOTING

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RIGHTS TO THE DIASPORA -----

¶15. (C) Acknowledging the Doha agreement will take time to implement, Zaatari commended the Arab League for its "first achievement in years." Rejecting the 1960 electoral law, Zaatari said the strength of the Boutros draft law is that it organizes the districts better. He suggested that the resigned cabinet agree on a new electoral law before a new government is formed so that it will be free to deal with other pressing issues, such as the economic situation.

¶16. (C) VP Bissat favors giving citizenship and nationality rights to the diaspora because Lebanon can benefit from its resources, such as tax payments. He agreed that voting rights should be expanded to these Lebanese, noting that both Christians and Muslims make up the Diaspora. "The Christian role is important to the image of Lebanon because the Christian presence distinguishes our country from the other Arab countries," Zaatari added.

HOPING FOR MORE USAID ASSISTANCE -----

¶17. (C) Anticipating an economic boom now that a president has been elected, the Chamber members hope to attract new investments in Sidon and request USG assistance. In particular, they said they would benefit from Food and Drug Administration import standards training. They proudly showed us a USAID-funded production facility, laboratory, and packaging and storage rooms, which serve as models to Small and Medium Enterprises (the project was executed through an ACDI/VOCA partnership).

¶18. (C) The Charge also met with Sidon Chamber of Commerce members involved with the USAID-State University of New York

municipalities project as well as the Cooperative Housing Foundation (CHF) representative partnering with USAID in fruit production and agro-food production upgrades at Ahlouna and Moassaat.
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